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DAVID GARFIELD

The Romance of a People

The history of twentieth century pageantry is, in its most notable manifestations, a record of theatrically resourceful productions, created in response to deeply felt social and political needs, and aimed at the articulation of those needs. The Hill Cumorah festival of the Mormons, the post-revolutionary political extravaganzas of the Soviet Union, and the labor pageants of the first half of this century were productions designed to excite the social consciousness of their audiences. Through the effective use of mass spectacle, geared, in each case, to particular commemorative or celebrative functions, these pageants succeeded in arousing their audiences by highly emotional appeals to a sense of community—appeals which served as a kind of spiritual reinforcement.

A case in point is *The Romance of a People*, the spectacular pageant of Jewish history that was produced in the early thirties and seen by hundreds of thousands in various American cities. *The Romance* was conceived as popular entertainment, with the practical purpose of raising money for the resettlement of German Jews in Palestine. But, in addition, it possessed an emotional purpose—a larger purpose—which was to celebrate a ceremony of affirmation in the face of the Nazi threat of destruction.

The concept of mass spectacle was central to *The Romance of a people* and determined its esthetic development and its emotional impact. Isaac Van Grove, who, as the General Pageant Director, was responsible for formulating the overall artistic framework of the production, felt strongly about the future of pageantry, which he referred to as “the mass theatre.” For him, the theatre of realism was *passé*, and the new mass spectacle, where a thousand or more people by a thrust of their bodies expressed disdain or happiness or humility, was a return to a primitively vital form. Although others saw *The Romance* as a demonstration against Hitler (this was, in fact, one of its creators’ intentions), or in its purely pragmatic function of raising money, Van Grove saw it primarily as a revived art form he hoped would endure.¹

In 1933 America was preparing to celebrate a “Century of Progress” at the Chicago World’s Fair. In Germany, that same year, a nightmare had begun with a systematic destruction of the Jewish life that had flourished there for many centuries. Fortunately, escape was still possible in the early stages of Nazi persecution (the Nuremberg Laws were not to be promulgated till 1935 and the horrors of the “final solution” were eight years in the future). Jews were still free to leave the country at a price. Various Jewish agencies were trying to raise money to ransom these people and get them resettled in other countries.

In the face of this turmoil in Europe and, in a sense, as a response to it, the organizers

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¹ *New York Evening Journal*, Sept. 13, 1933, p. 14.

of the Chicago World's Fair were interested in having the Jews of that city participate visibly in the "Century of Progress." The form that this participation was to take proved a complicated issue. Finally, however, through an enterprising Zionist, Meyer W. Weisgal, the unique Jewish contribution to the Chicago Fair found its shape.

Weisgal had just finished producing an enormously successful Chanukah Festival in Chicago which, having started out modestly enough, had wound up a large-scale enterprise (3,000 performers) and a remunerative one for Zionist causes. It was Weisgal, building on his experience with the Chanukah pageant, who submitted the idea of an enormous spectacle portraying 4,000 years of Jewish history, to be called *The Romance of a People*.² It was to be presented on Jewish Day (as July 3 had been designated) as the Jewish contribution to the Fair, and the profits were to be used to help finance the resettlement of refugees from Nazi Germany.

The historical pageant was conceived as a prologue and nine episodes with interspersed interludes. The prologue, which depicted The Creation, was followed by Abraham and the struggle between monotheism and ecclesiastical idolatry; Bondage in Egypt; Moses' liberation of his people; The Glory of Jerusalem under Solomon; Its destruction by the Romans; Peace and culture in Spain; Expulsion from Grenada; Homelessness in Europe; The finding of a mystic inner satisfaction (Chassidism); Freedom through America; and The restoration of the ancient homeland in Palestine.

Having won support for his project from the Fair's president, Weisgal proceeded to produce *The Romance*, using, as he had in his Chanukah Festival, thousands of Hebrew school students to fill his huge crowd scenes. These he supplemented with other volunteers and a sprinkling of professional actors, singers, and dancers. Weisgal claims that, after his initial idea, "the retinue I had acquired during the Chanukah Festival was the real creator of *The Romance*." This retinue included Isaac Van Grove, "an energetic Dutchman of Jewish descent and the former director of the Chicago Civic Opera" who developed the musical materials and directed the production and who was to play a central role in the even more spectacular restaging of the pageant in New York.³

Weisgal made the pageant a focus of Jewish interest and assured its success by persuading Dr. Chaim Weizmann to attend the opening and make a brief speech. For this, he promised Weizmann \$100,000 from the proceeds of the pageant for his Central Refugee Fund to help emigrating German Jews resettle in Palestine.

The Romance, which was received with enormous good will and critical acclaim, was an immense success. It was seen by 200,000 people and netted a profit of \$60,000. "Not since Max Reinhardt had staged *The Miracle*," it was said, "had as stupendous a production been seen in America."⁴ The *New York Daily News* was impressed enough to finance a restaging of the pageant at the Polo Grounds on September 14th that was to prove even more spectacular and more profitable than the Chicago original.

The political and social support organized for the New York production of *The Romance* was extraordinarily extensive. Every New York newspaper ran regular bulletins

² Meyer W. Weisgal, *Meyer Weisgal . . . So Far* (New York, 1972), p. 109.

³ Weisgal, p. 110.

⁴ James O'Donnell Bennett, "The Romance of a People," *Chicago Tribune*, July 4, 1933.

about its progress.⁵ Senator Robert F. Wagner served as honorary vice chairman of the sponsoring committee while New York's Governor Lehman had the honorary title of chairman. Mayor John P. O'Brien, who declared September 14th (the opening date) as "Jewish Day," was also an honorary vice chairman. The list of sponsors included U.S. attorneys, borough presidents, Supreme Court justices, judges, and congressmen (including Alfred E. Smith).

Over three hundred Christian and Jewish organizations participated in supporting the pageant. Special efforts were made to develop Christian interest in *The Romance*, and over 1,500 Christians actually participated in the production. Various gestures of official support were made, as, for example, the plan to fly one hundred planes over the Polo Grounds in an opening day salute.⁶ The constant barrage of publicity created enormous curiosity and anticipation. Soon after it was announced, in fact, there was an advance sale of \$150,000.

Thousands volunteered to participate in *The Romance*. As in Chicago, the bulk of participants were Hebrew school students, complemented with hundreds of other amateurs as well as a smattering of professional actors, singers, and dancers in the principal roles. Hundreds of would-be performers were turned away. With 6,200 participants, the pageant boasted one of the largest casts ever assembled.⁷ The difficulty of rehearsing and controlling such vast numbers during performance became an intricate problem of logistics.

As Production Director of the pageant, Jacob Ben-Ami, the famous Jewish actor formerly associated with the Theatre Guild and the Civic Repertory, was responsible for its dramatic content. Faced with the task of molding the thousands of amateurs into the Children of Israel of 4,000 years ago, the Roman Centurions, the Jewish high priests, the invading hordes, and the other characters of ancient times, he summed up the rationale and directorial intent of *The Romance* as follows:

The Romance of a People covering 4,000 years of Jewish history, demands a kaleidoscopic juxtaposition of themes and moods unparalleled in their depth and implications. So sweeping is the pattern of the pageant that the dramatic medium, inadequate to portray it and bring it into full blossoming alone, has been merged with the dance and oratorio forms. The wedding of these three art forms will of course give a ripe and rich texture to the pageant. Yet the dramatic element must provide the link between them and establish the tempo and color for the cavalcade of Jewish events down the ages. This is a very important factor, since the episodes in the story are ten [sic], punctuated by intervals of centuries. The creation of unity and continuity of action falls to the lot of the dramatic idiom. . . .

The immense proportions of the stage will naturally preclude any suggestion of the shifting of scenes or the customary change of settings which ordinarily accompanies the shifting of action. The director must therefore resort to lighting, costumes and grouping to create the mood and setting which the particular scene requires.

⁵ News items about the Romance's progress, supplemented by feature articles, can be followed in the daily New York newspapers (e.g., *New York Times*, *Herald Tribune*, and *News*) from August through October of 1933. In addition, in connection with the pageant, the *New York Journal* published, from Sept. 11 through Sept. 29, a series of articles on Palestine by Dr. Chaim Weizmann with daily reminders to its readers to be sure to attend *The Romance*.

⁶ *New York Times*, Sept. 11, 1933.

⁷ In 1920, for the Soviet pageant, *The Storming of the Winter Palace*, Nikolai Evreinov used more than 8,000 Red Army men, sailors, workers, and actors.

The pageant has a dramatic form expression all its own. The cast must be molded in the image of the group. The players must be trained in the idiom of the group rather than in individual interpretation in order to conform to the mass theme of the pageant. Moreover, the enormous size of the audience and the unusually long distance separating it from the players also require that the visual emphasis be transferred from the face to the body. Just as the individual must become submerged and fused in the personality of the group, so must the individual's facial and physical expressions be made to conform to a group expression of movement.

Here the actor of the conventional theatre does not exist. He exists only as a member of one collective body. Alone he cuts a ridiculous figure swinging his arms or gesturing with his head meaninglessly. Merged in a group the very same gyrations become a most potent force. It is one of the miracles of the theatre that a carefully trained mass of little more than mediocre actors can attain the unique and stirring moments in the mass drama which only an individual actor of the first magnitude can achieve.⁸

On the eve of the Polo Grounds opening, New York was inundated with a four-day rain storm which threatened to ruin the production plans. Weisgal describes how the pageant scenery floated around the ball park's infield on a veritable lake created by the rains. In desperation, he went to Albany to see Governor Lehman about getting permission to use the Kingsbridge Armory as a substitute locale for *The Romance*.

The Kingsbridge 258th Field Artillery Armory on Jerome Avenue and Kingsbridge Road in the Bronx was the largest structure of its kind in the United States. Its floor space was larger than the ball park's playing field and it offered protection against further threats from the weather. The huge setting had fortunately been conceived as a portable structure with the idea of repeating the pageant in other cities in mind. So it could be moved to the Bronx, where four hundred workmen assembled it in forty-eight hours. Weisgal called in the American Felt Company to insulate the vast building because of the tremendous echo problem and contracted with Sears Roebuck to build 21,000 seats.⁹

Though the new location was better suited for the light and sound effects the pageant was using, the reduced seating capacity meant less income. This problem was ultimately overcome by extending the run. In one week, 1,000 workers transformed the armory into a theatre capable of seating 21,000 spectators.¹⁰ Before it finished its run, the immensely popular pageant played to almost a million people under the "great, gray, green, girders" of the Kingsbridge Avenue edifice.

Peter Clark's stage setting for *The Romance* was one of the largest ever designed.¹¹ Clark, who created the stages of the Radio City Music Hall as well as that of the Rex Theatre in Paris (at the time the largest in Europe), evolved a four unit acting complex for *The Romance*, the over-all dimensions of which were 550 by 300 feet. The first acting area was a lectern in the shape of a six-pointed Star of David within a circle (the circle's diameter was 58 feet). Upon the lectern rested the great "Scroll of the Ages" from which the pageant narrator read and interpreted. Six spotlights, one in each point of the star, could shoot their light upward for various effects.

⁸ Jacob Ben-Ami, "Welding Untrained Amateurs Into a 'Cavalcade of Jewry'" (feature article), *New York Herald Tribune*, Sept. 10, 1933.

⁹ Weisgal, p. 115.

¹⁰ The Polo Ground's seating capacity was 54,000. The move, therefore, necessitated three performances for each one originally planned.

¹¹ Julian Clarence Levi, the architect for the setting, used fifteen carloads of lumber in executing Clark's design. There were 100,000 square feet of scenery.

The second area was the principal focus of action, a circular stage, 150 feet in diameter, with a smaller stage, 75 feet in diameter, superimposed on it. The lower of these was fronted by an arc of stairs and terraces 180 feet long, and at its rear were two large ramps 25 feet wide. Access to the superimposed stage, which was 16 feet above the ground, was by smaller staircases and ramps surrounding it.

The third acting area was an arcing bridge, 77 feet long by 16 feet wide, connecting the circular stage to the fourth and final structure, which was the Temple of Solomon complex. This last consisted of a plaza, 60 by 30 feet (reached also from the ground by two wide staircases), a representation of Jerusalem showing seven streets with tiers of dwellings rising steppe-like one above another, with the lowest street stretching out to the right and left, flanking the main structure. Towering above all was the Temple itself, rising 120 feet from ground to dome.

The Temple was seen in two different versions. In the early part of the pageant it was represented as it supposedly appeared in Solomon's time. Later came its burning by the Romans and a period of darkness. As the pageant reached the modern era, it was bathed in a crown of light and showed a new cupola patterned after that at the Hebrew University—symbolizing the Jewish rebirth in Palestine. Clark created other special set pieces that required fire or lighting effects. These included the Burning Bush and the Idol, Moloch. The latter was constructed on a wood and metal framework 17 feet high and weighed 2½ tons. It was hauled on by fifty "slaves" with flames shooting from its nose and mouth.

A special feature of Clark's setting was provision for a sound-proof room beneath the circular stage. This housed the entire orchestra and the singers (many from the Metropolitan Opera chorus) and from here the music for the pageant was broadcast.¹² All sound, in fact, including the voice of the reader and the voices of those principals who were supposed to speak, emanated from this room. The action outside was synchronized with the music or speech. In this way, problems of projection and of the use of onstage microphones were eliminated. The actors mimed to the sound created beneath them.

The "binaural, electro-acoustical system," as it was called, was a highly innovative sound set-up—probably the first public use in the United States of what has since come to be known as stereophonic sound. This "binaural" system could send out sound waves on the order of 135 decibels. Forty loudspeakers of different sizes were deployed in the facade of the Temple unit, which dominated the pageant setting. The sound of this equipment covered the span of human hearing. The largest speaker weighed 300 pounds, was 4 feet in diameter, had a frequency of only 16 Hz, and could transmit the lowest of organ tones. Higher tones were transmitted by tiny horns only 4 inches in diameter, sending waves of 16,000 Hz. All this meant that the sound was loud, spacious, undistorted, and very lifelike.

The lighting instruments, located on the set itself (as in the lectern unit) and in the ceiling of the armory, were controlled by the usual lighting crew. From a special "cubby hole" under the stage, however, Van Grove was able to control directly the aspects of lighting that created nuances and to make last minute adjustments. This was necessary because the lighting cues were musical and difficult to time.

¹² *New York Times*, Aug. 29, 1933.

The huge cast was broken up into small units for rehearsals. These were held at the Washington Irving High School, groups working in the gymnasium and assorted classrooms. Van Grove, Ben-Ami, and Louis Chalif, (the dance director) alternated with the different units, working successively on the music, the dramatic aspects, and the dancing with each group. Two weeks before the scheduled opening at the Polo Grounds, combined rehearsals were begun. For this huge task, more than 20 assistant directors and stage managers were used.

During the playing of the pageant, Van Grove took charge of the running operation. With his various assistants and stage managers spotted strategically around the mammoth setting, Van Grove kept in close touch with his enormous company at each moment. Working from his little "cubby hole" as headquarters, he directed and led movement, constantly on the move himself. Sometimes he communicated over a telephone with the orchestra under the stage, who could neither see nor hear the performance, singing important musical cues to the orchestra conductor. Sometimes he moved among the cast, slipping into a costume at various points for one of the mass scenes, leading the performers with specific movements that would spread from body to body at his cue.

The majority of the pageant's music came from the collection of Dr. A. D. Idlesohn, Professor of Jewish Music at Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati. Idlesohn spent twelve years of research in Palestine, living among the local inhabitants and recording their age-old laments. He was one of the first to reduce these primitively intense songs, for the most part sung without words, to notation.

The score is distinctly Hebraic; it draws upon Yemenite, Persian, or Spanish Jewish melodies, and Yiddish folk song. All of the music was arranged and adapted by Van Grove, who in one instance—the Bacchanale of the Moloch episode—composed the music specifically for *The Romance*.¹³

The Romance of a People played for six weeks, grossed an estimated \$450,000, and was seen by over 900,000 people. Weisgal made good his promise to Weizmann by handing over \$150,000 to the American Palestine Campaign and affiliates. The remaining \$50,000 was distributed to local Jewish charities.¹⁴ So successful was the pageant that Weisgal intended to produce it in London and Paris, but these European productions never came to pass. There were also published reports at one point that Warner Brothers was planning to film *The Romance*. This too came to naught.

The Romance did travel nationally, however. It was done in Philadelphia (where Albert Einstein was the guest of honor at the opening) and in Cleveland and Detroit. Weisgal arranged for the local Zionist organizations in each city to take over the sale of tickets and the recruiting of the huge cast, in return for which they received 50% of the profits.

An effort to revive the spectacle in New York was made a year later. A one-hour version, on a more compact scale, with "only" 300 people in the cast, opened on

¹³ A copy of a souvenir lead sheet of major musical themes from the pageant, lent to the author by Mrs. Belle Ehrenreich, a featured dancer in *The Romance*, has been placed on file in the Theatre Collection of the New York Public Library.

¹⁴ *New York Times*, Oct. 21, 1933. Weisgal explained the enormous gap between net and gross profits as follows: At the Polo Grounds, the production would have cost only \$85,000. The emergency move to the Kingsbridge Armory increased the costs by \$165,000.

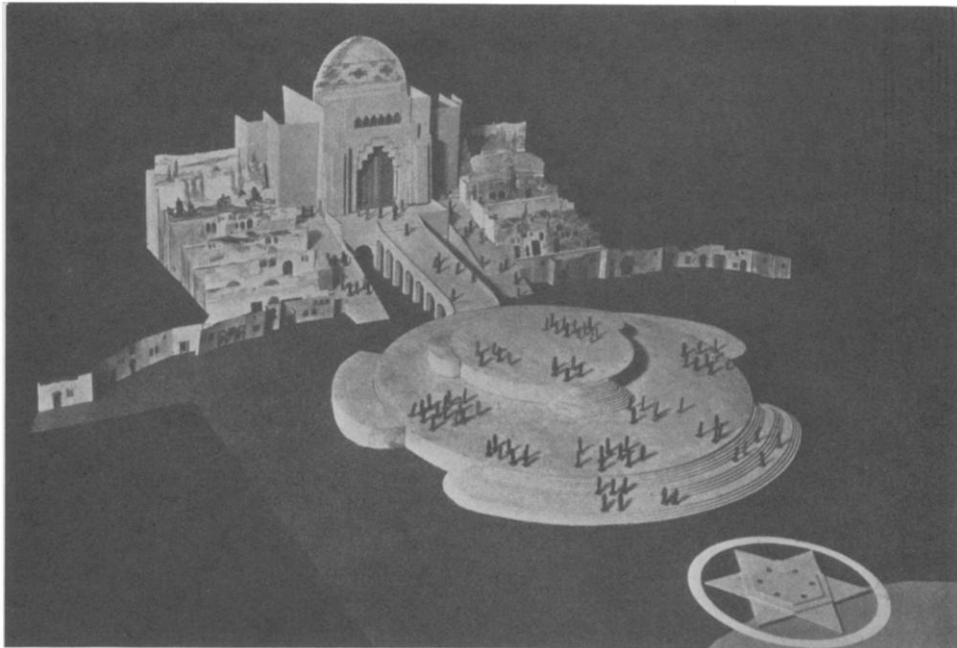
September 7 1934 at the Roxy Theatre. It played four times a day (five on weekends) between film shows. It lasted only briefly.

Weisgal, having experienced success and acclaim with *The Romance*, was eager to pursue the “answer to Hitler” into an even more esthetically enduring form. He recalls in his autobiography:

While I was working in Chicago on *The Romance*, I read an item in the paper that Max Reinhardt had to flee Germany. In one of my inspired moments I sent off a cable: To Max Reinhardt, Europe: IF HITLER DOESN'T WANT YOU I'LL TAKE YOU. The cable never reached him, but the idea stayed with me. Its purport, to put it simply, was to put together a Reinhardt-directed spectacle on a theme resembling *The Romance*, as a sort of answer to Hitler; but unlike *The Romance* it was to be the project of some of the greatest artists of our time.¹⁵

Carrying production photos of *The Romance* to a meeting with Reinhardt at the Théâtre Pigalle in Paris, Weisgal won the famous director over to his project. From their collaboration and the participation of Franz Werfel as author, Kurt Weill as composer, and Norman Bel Geddes as set designer came the production of *The Eternal Road*.

¹⁵ Weisgal, p. 116.



Setting for “The Romance of a People”